STUDY GUIDE

# The Deal

*A complete reader's companion*

by Elle Kennedy

Briar U Series · Book 1 · 2015

Summary · Characters · Themes · Analysis · Quotes

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| **Plot**<br>Chapter-by-chapter walkthrough | **Characters**<br>Full cast analysis | **Themes**<br>Consent, trauma, identity | **Quotes**<br>Key passages explained |

# About the Novel

**The Deal** is a 2015 new-adult sports romance by Canadian author Elle Kennedy and the first novel in her bestselling *Off-Campus* / Briar U series. Set at the fictional Briar University, it follows music major Hannah Wells and star hockey captain Garrett Graham, whose transactional arrangement — tutoring in exchange for social coaching — evolves into one of contemporary romance's most-discussed relationships.

The novel is told in alternating first-person points of view, a structural choice that lets Kennedy explore two parallel arcs: Hannah's recovery from sexual assault and reclamation of intimacy, and Garrett's confrontation with paternal abuse and inherited shame. Its appeal rests on character voice, the slow-burn shift from banter to trust, and a careful treatment of consent that distinguishes it from much of the genre.

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| **Author** | Elle Kennedy |
| **First published** | 2015 |
| **Series** | Off-Campus #1 / Briar U |
| **Genre** | New adult sports romance |
| **Setting** | Briar University (fictional, New England) |
| **POV** | Dual first-person (Hannah & Garrett) |
| **Content notes** | Sexual assault (backstory), domestic abuse, explicit content |

# Plot Summary

Hannah Wells, a junior at Briar University, earns the top grade on a philosophy midterm in a course where most of the class — including the hockey team — has failed. Garrett Graham, the team captain, risks academic ineligibility if he can't pull his average up. He approaches Hannah for tutoring; she refuses. Garrett persists, and Hannah eventually proposes terms of her own: she'll tutor him in exchange for a single fake date, to make a popular football player she's been crushing on take notice.

The arrangement works almost too well. Justin Kohl notices Hannah, but the more time she spends with Garrett — at parties, on study nights, in the easy back-and-forth that develops between them — the harder it becomes to pretend their dynamic is purely transactional. Hannah's backstory unspools slowly: a sexual assault at fifteen that has shaped her relationship with her body, her music, and her sense of safety. Garrett's family situation surfaces with equal weight — his father Phil, a former NHL player, is physically abusive, and Garrett has spent years protecting his mother before her death.

The romance progresses through familiar beats — first kiss, the deepening trust, the inevitable rupture — but Kennedy slows the physical arc significantly. Hannah and Garrett negotiate intimacy in explicit, verbal terms, and the novel's sex scenes are notable in the genre for how directly they treat ongoing consent. The third-act conflict is driven by Phil, who discovers the relationship and threatens to cut Garrett off financially unless he ends it. Garrett breaks things off without explanation. Hannah, devastated, returns to her music.

The resolution comes when Garrett gains access to a trust fund from his late mother's family, frees himself from Phil's leverage, and publicly recommits to Hannah — culminating at her spring music showcase and his Frozen Four championship. The novel closes on a stable, established couple rather than a grand-gesture cliffhanger.

# Major Characters

## Hannah Wells

A 21-year-old music major and the novel's emotional center. Hannah is academically disciplined, vocally gifted, and socially guarded — a combination shaped by the assault she survived at fifteen. Her arc is not about being rescued; the relationship with Garrett accelerates a reclamation that is already underway. Kennedy is careful to give Hannah agency at every escalation: she sets the terms of the original deal, initiates much of the physical relationship, and walks away when Garrett breaks her trust.

## Garrett Graham

Captain of Briar's hockey team and the second narrator. Garrett's public persona — confident, charming, casually arrogant — masks a long history of physical abuse from his father. His attraction to Hannah is partly drawn from her refusal to be impressed by him, and his growth comes from learning to be vulnerable on her terms rather than performing competence. His arc is one of cutting ties: with his father's money, his father's expectations, and the version of masculinity Phil represents.

## Phil Graham

Garrett's father and the novel's antagonist. A former NHL player whose career ended in injury, Phil is the source of Garrett's wealth, his hockey career, and his deepest wounds. Kennedy uses Phil to dramatize how athletic excellence can be weaponized within families — his abuse is framed as 'making' Garrett, and his eventual loss of leverage is the structural condition for the romance to resolve.

## Supporting Cast

**Allie Hayes**, Hannah's roommate, provides the friendship that anchors Hannah's social world. **Justin Kohl**, the football player Hannah initially pursues, functions as a foil — pleasant, uncomplicated, and ultimately not what Hannah wants. **Logan, Tucker, and Dean**, Garrett's hockey teammates, populate the wider Off-Campus series and seed later books.

# Major Themes

### Consent as Ongoing Negotiation

More than perhaps any of its plot beats, the book is known for foregrounding verbal, ongoing consent. Hannah's history requires Garrett to ask rather than assume; the result is a romance in which intimacy advances through explicit conversation. Critics have read this as a deliberate intervention in genre conventions that often elide the question.

### Trauma and Reclamation

Both leads carry trauma, but the novel resists the trope of the love interest as healer. Hannah's recovery from sexual assault is presented as work she is already doing — through therapy, music, and chosen risks. The relationship accelerates her timeline rather than providing the cure.

### Masculinity and Inheritance

Garrett's arc is a study in what gets passed down between fathers and sons. He has inherited Phil's body, his sport, and his money; the novel's central question for him is what of that inheritance he chooses to keep. The trust fund from his mother's family functions as a literal alternative inheritance — one that lets him sever the abusive line.

### Performance and Authenticity

Both characters live performed lives — Garrett as the team captain, Hannah as the composed music major. The deal that frames the novel is itself a performance, and the romance's progress can be tracked by how much of that performance each character drops.

# Key Motifs

- **Music and voice.** Hannah's singing is the novel's recurring image for what was taken and what is reclaimed; her spring showcase performance closes the arc.
- **The locker room.** A male-coded space Garrett initially controls; Hannah enters it twice, both times as a turning point — once to confront him, once to claim him.
- **Ice and warmth.** Hockey supplies a vocabulary of hardness and cold that the romance progressively melts.
- **The deal itself.** The transactional frame returns throughout as a question: which exchanges between people are honest, and which are manipulations?

# Discussion Questions

- How does Kennedy use the dual first-person POV to control sympathy and reveal information? Where would the novel feel different if told only from Hannah's perspective?
- The opening deal is an explicit contract. Trace how the language of negotiation evolves between Hannah and Garrett across the novel — and what replaces it.
- Hannah's assault is in her past, not the plot's present. How does this structural choice shape the kind of recovery the novel can show?
- Phil never reforms. Is the novel's refusal to redeem him an honest depiction of abuse, or a narrative shortcut?
- The book has been read both as a feminist intervention in new-adult romance and as a conventional fantasy. Which reading does the text support more strongly, and where do they conflict?
- Compare Justin Kohl and Garrett as romantic options. What does Hannah's choice tell us about what the novel values?

## Continue Reading

This is a preview. The complete guide — with full chapter summaries, expanded character analyses, annotated quotes, and essay prompts — is available free at **https://chesserresources.com.au/doc/the-deal-pdf/**.

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